DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 274 JC 930 540

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TITLE Orientation at the Community College: Sometimes, One Size Does Not Fit All.
PUB DATE 12 Nov 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Missouri Community College Association (Springfield, MO, November 11-12, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Community Colleges; Educational Assessment; Educational Counseling; *Guidance Objectives; Participant Satisfaction; Program Costs; *Program Development; Program Evaluation; *Program Improvement; School Holding Power; *School Orientation; Student Personnel Services; *Student School Relationship; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *East Central College MO

ABSTRACT

In spring 1992, a group of faculty and staff at East Central College (ECC) in Union, Missouri, met to reconsider the school's orientation process, which had had limited success since its inception in 1987. The group developed a list of objectives for the orientation process and grouped them under the headings of skills, awareness, involvement, and evaluation. After meeting with all employee groups on campus, a final program design was developed. The final design included six components: (1) freshman assessment, whereby students are introduced to key people on campus, complete assessment instruments scored on the premises, and meet with an advisor or faculty member to verify correct placement in courses; (2) an All-Campus Orientation Day on the day before classes begin, involving meetings with academic advisors, simultaneous presentations throughout the day, pre-registration, a picnic lunch, and games; (3) early intervention, whereby at-risk students receive warnings during the fifth week of the term; (4) required assignments including a word processed essay in which the student introduces him/herself and describes his/her initial educational experiences at ECC; (5) an Advisement Seminar held during the last half of the semester for students to work out the next semester's schedule of classes and make individual advisement appointments; and (6) Adult Re-Entry Orientation, a special four-day, free orientation for adults considering attending ECC. The program is evaluated by students as well as by faculty and staff. An Orientation Day agenda and sample program budget are included. (PAA)

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Missouri Community College Association Meeting
November 12, 1993

ED 364 274

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Orientation at the Community College

Sometimes, One Size Does Not Fit All

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JC 930 540

Orientations are held at most post-secondary institutions with the common-sense goal that students need to be informed about services, procedures, and the culture of the institution they are entering. Additionally, Tinto's (1987) theories of student retention emphasize that students' academic and social involvement with an institution is correlated with students' likelihood of retention and academic success.

Upcraft and Farnsworth (Upcraft, 1984) define orientation as "any effort on the part of an institution to help entering students make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and to enhance their success in college." It is crucial for developers of any orientation to understand that "previous environment" will vary greatly among students and that "[enhancing] their success in college" requires more than information disbursal by college staff.

This customization of orientation to address the specific needs of individual students is especially problematic at the typical community college where students tend to be extremely diverse in terms of age, life experience, and extra-curricular responsibilities. Additionally, since most community college students are non-residential, even getting the students to attend an orientation activity can be difficult.

Upcraft and Farnsworth state that any effective orientation should: 1) be a sustained and coordinated

effort; 2) have the support and involvement of the entire campus community; 3) be based on sound concepts of student development and on what is known about the influence of the collegiate environment; 4) use a wide variety of interventions; 5) be appropriately timed and sequenced; 6) be evaluated to determine if it is really effective; and 7) be coordinated by a central office or person.

Development of Orientation at East Central College

East Central College is a public community college of approximately 3,000 students located in Union, Missouri--a rural area 35 miles southwest of St. Louis. The college's faculty serve as advisors, as do three counselors and a full-time staff academic advisor.

At East Central, orientation was historically not as successful as the staff would have wished. From its inception in 1987, the orientation process was set up to be a requirement of degree-seeking students. Even so, students did not participate to a great extent during their first semesters when it was most crucial to do so, and some faculty were only lukewarm in their support of the process. In Spring, 1992, an interested group of faculty and other staff met to reconsider the orientation process. They produced a "wants" list of what orientation should accomplish, falling under the general headings of "Skills", "Awareness", "Involvement", and "Evaluation":

Skills

1. A procedure to meet the new state guidelines of assessing entering students, and, at the same time, a better way to insure proper placement in basic skills classes, such as mathematics and English.
2. Help for students with poor study skills, math anxiety, inadequate time management skills, etc.
3. Early intervention for academically "at risk" students.
4. Basic computer skills for all entering students.
5. A timely and efficient program that would not take study time away from other classes.

Awareness

1. An increased student awareness of the services offered on campus, such as the writing center, mathematics and English labs, counseling and advisement.
2. A method of diminishing student anxiety over finding classrooms, faculty offices and support service areas, as well as help for adult students with fears about returning to school.
3. Help for undecided students in choosing a major and for those students with a major, a chance to learn more about their chosen fields.
4. Early socialization, especially for those students coming from outside the immediate college district.

Involvement

1. A method for encouraging club participation.
2. A higher level of student participation in Orientation.

3. A greater level of support and involvement on the part of all college faculty and staff.

Evaluation

1. Feedback from students relative to the college's marketing approach and students' early experience at East Central College.
2. Measurable results to determine the effectiveness of the program.

The group of faculty and staff formulated a program to meet these goals. A crucial part of the process was to meet with all employee groups on campus (faculty, staff, and classified) to get their feedback and support. The final design included six components: Freshman assessment, All-Campus Orientation Day, Early Intervention, assignments, Advisement Seminar, and the Adult Re-Entry Orientation.

Freshman assessment

Several group sessions are held throughout the summer (for fall entrants) and in early January (for spring entrants) in which students are introduced to key people on campus and given information about the services that are available. A standardized placement/assessment test (ASSET) is administered and computer-scored on the premises. Each student then speaks to an academic advisor or faculty member before he/she is dismissed in order to verify correct placement in courses, especially mathematics and English.

All-Campus Orientation Day

An All-Campus Orientation Day is held the day before classes begin (a Tuesday) to give students a chance to a) meet their academic advisors and other students, b) gain exposure to basic study skills and academic planning methods, and c) become familiar with the campus before their classes begin. This Orientation Day is organized in the format of a conference or convention. Faculty and staff conduct the various sessions, running simultaneously throughout the day. Students pre-register for the sessions of their choice (during the freshman assessment sessions) so students may choose topics that they consider relevant. These topics vary from semester to semester as demands change, but have included "How to Make A's and Still Have Time for Your Friends", "Dealing with Math Anxiety", and "Balancing School and Family", among others. The pre-registration system helps in planning for handouts, room utilization, speakers, etc.

As part of Orientation Day, a picnic lunch is served, with games and prizes (such as ECC sweatshirts) for entertainment.

A necessary element for the success of this day is that all employees (faculty, professional staff, classified staff) are involved, whether giving directions, leading tours, presenting sessions, or handing out lunches. Each employee wears an ECC t-shirt so as to be readily identifiable to the students.

[Note: A sample agenda, which would be personalized for each student and given to him/her at the start of the day, is shown in Appendix A.]

Early intervention

ECC had a history of mailing out mid-term (8th week) deficiency grade reports to students who appeared to be experiencing academic problems. It was the consensus of the faculty that the 8th week was too late for this kind of feedback as it was often Week 10 before the reports reached students via the mail.

Instead, the college began sending out warnings after Week 5. After an unsuccessful attempt to require at-risk students to meet with their advisors, the college began instead to enclose letters expressing concern and describing the assortment of services available to assist the students.

Assignments

As part of their Orientation work, students are required to complete certain assignments:

1. Students are required to use a word processor to complete a short essay covering the items below. Several locations around campus are established for computer assistance.

Elements:

a. Introduce yourself (name, age, where you live, where you went to high school, where you work--if you do, etc.)

b. Describe your initial enrollment experience at ECC. Any problems? Were the staff helpful?

c. Explain why you chose to attend ECC.

d. Describe two of your classes and instructors.

e. Evaluate your start at ECC. Offer any suggestions you think would make the beginning of college here at ECC better.

2. At one time, students were given an assignment to utilize at least one module of a career planning computer program, such as ACT's DISCOVER or Missouri-VIEW. However, this assignment over-burdened those terminals loaded with the software, so it has been phased out.

3. Optional brown bag seminars are planned to enhance our emphasis on study skills, special needs, etc., in a timely fashion.

Advisement Seminar

During the last half of the semester, classes are cancelled for one hour and students are required to attend an advisement seminar. This time is used to work out the next semester's schedule of classes or to make individual advisement appointments.

Adult Re-Entry Orientation

A special four-day (four hours each day) orientation is held free of charge for adults who are considering attending college. Assessment is included and topics covered are especially relevant to adult students.

All these elements are under the umbrella of a 1 semester credit-hour course entitled ED1001 Orientation for Student Success. All new degree-seeking students are required to complete the course. Students receive either a "P" grade or a "W" grade, in which case they need to re-enroll in a future semester. (ED1001 appears as a degree requirement for all 2-year degrees.)

Alternative formats of this orientation requirement address the needs of evening students and of those students who, for whatever reason, delay completion of the requirement until later in their academic programs. For example, a workbook has been designed wherein students approaching graduation and still needing this requirement may complete a series of assignments directed more toward transfer or employment issues. (The number of students delaying completion is very small.)

Evaluation

Throughout this system, students and staff provide feedback for evaluation purposes. On the reverse side of each student's Orientation Day agenda is an evaluation form for that day's activities. Students turn these in at the end of the day, and they double as an attendance-confirmation device. These evaluations have a direct bearing on the format and topics of the next semester's program.

In addition, shortly after the Orientation Day, faculty and staff are asked for comments on the process. This feedback has led to several significant alterations.

The essay (word-processing) assignment provides invaluable information about students' perceptions of their entry into the institution. Information/comments (positive and negative) from these essays are routed to the appropriate personnel. (In the case of strongly negative comments, some discretion must be used in directing the information.)

Finally, at the end of the semester a pre-paid return postcard is sent to the students asking for their feelings about the orientation process. While this requirement is not held in unanimous high favor, a recent semester showed that approximately 72% of the students reported that the orientation was helpful to them and should be continued. The college plans to study any changes in the retention trends that appear correlated to this program, but such a study has not yet been completed.

Cost

A sample budget for the Orientation program is shown in Appendix B. It should be noted that the test booklets for Freshman assessment are reusable, so they are not an expense that reoccurs each semester

References

Tinto, V. (1987). Leaving college. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Upcraft, M.L. (Ed.) (1984). Orienting students to college. (New Directions for Student Services series, no. 25). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

All Campus Orientation Day Agenda

8:40am-8:55am	General Session	Welcome students Introductions Tell students what they will be doing today and why
9am-10:00am	Advisor Session (flexible agenda)	Introduction Ice breaking activities Advisor describes major, job opportunities, educational requirements, job security, etc. Guest speaker (former student) Questions and answers
10:10am-10:35am	Session A Topics *(student choice)*	*Time Management* *Career Exploration* *Money Management* *Goal Setting & Decision Making* *Transfer Tips* *Job Placement/Part-time Employment* *Math Anxiety* *How to Make an A and Still Have Time for Your Friends* *Balancing School and Family* *Wellness* *Financial Aid* *Stress Management* *Test Anxiety*
10:35am-10:45am	Break	
10:45am-11:10am	Session B Topics	(same as Session A)
11:10am-11:20am	Break	
11:20am-11:45am	Session C Topics	(same as Session A)
11:45am-12:45pm	Lunch/Recreation	Picnic/volleyball/prizes
12:45pm-1:10pm	Advisor Session	Explain orientation assignments Questions and answers Evaluation Optional tour of campus

Budget: (based on 700 students)

A.	**Income**		
	Student fees ($34/credit hour)		$23,800
B.	**Expenses**		
	1.	Freshmen Assessment	
		standardized test booklets ($5 ea.)	625
		answer sheets ($2.25 ea.)	1575
		pencils, scrap paper	30
		soda for breaks	300
		postcard reminders	30
		postage	140
	2.	All Campus Orientation	
		food and beverages for picnic lunch	3000
		folders & miscellaneous handouts	2000
		postcard reminders	30
		postage	140
		T shirts	625
	3.	Early Intervention	
		letters, envelopes	100
		postage	300
	Total Expenses		* 8895

*All personnel expenses were "in kind".

C.	**Net income**	**$14,905**